

» By Dr Andy Monk

Garnaut and the amount of guano in response...

“It’s under our feet and in our hands”

Climate change, carbon sequestration, carbon pollution, and a carbon constrained economy” are terms that have in recent years become common points of conversation, though possibly often little understood by those who use the terms, including some of the best of our policy makers. Numerous experts have sprung up to inform us on such matters, and Carbon with a big C is now being positioned as both the threat as well as the solution to all manner of challenges facing humanity, from turning the tide on the current drying cycle of our southern waterways to stopping deforestation. As ever, with a human desire for scapegoats in times of turmoil, and a propensity to perceive matters in very simplistic and singular ways, we have seen a lemming rush to solutions that may be far from that, and worse, may well lead us to be putting further patches on an otherwise questionably designed industrial economic system that continues to struggle with accounting for “externalities” not costed into end products for sale.

Luckily the organic industry, and biologically oriented farmers, have something not only to offer to the carbon frenzy of the current decade, but far more importantly offer a profound rethinking of some of the ingrained assumptions about the way we produce foods and fibres, from fertilizing programs and pest management approaches, through farming and value adding, to the retailing and marketing to the consumer.

Yes, the organic industry has indeed become more of an “industry” in recent years, but will always still be reliant on its founding fundamentals of an organic standard that requires a holistic design focus on recycling of energy and nutrients and a protection and enhancement of water and soil ecology. This is without even mentioning what arguably will always remain the utmost important point for consumers: quality and nutritious foods produced without modern

synthetic ingredients and additives. The organic package is not a single issue claim, ie it is not just “non GMO” or “no pesticides” but is in fact an integrated package of goodies, much like a well functioning, holistically managed farm. You can’t simply say on a well managed farm that “the worms do it” or the “compost tea does it”. It is in its entirety that it proves its

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organic, holistic merits.

This entire organic “package” is what we really need to have our policy makers, researchers, and in turn the public, focus on in any debate about unleashing an “Emissions Trading Scheme” (ETS) into agriculture and the food industry that may otherwise at best be a mere distraction from taking real and meaningful steps towards change right now.

The BFA put forward a submission to the recent “Green paper” on these matters (see the BFA website for the full submission). Some of the key points made were:

- “an ‘opt-in’ option for forestry in the short term (2010 – 2015) should be extended to agriculture generally...(otherwise) missing what arguably could be the biggest single optimal positive impact on carbon

abatement and sequestering: organically/ biologically managed soils;

- “..... organic farmers, and farming systems can naturally sequester and increase carbon (via increasing and protecting humus in soils), reduce carbon loss by holistic and integrated farming systems practices, and eliminate carbon emissions in the first place by not relying on synthetic, fossil fuel reliant inputs such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. In short, the solution is under our feet and already in the hands of leading organic agricultural practitioners;

and while noting a reference to risks facing agriculture, BFA noted the paper failed to

- “...engage in a structural critique of Australia’s currently fragile and unsustainable agricultural and food production systems, including this sector’s continued over-reliance on synthetic inputs and fossil fuel use, and practices that continue to ‘burn out’ carbon from the soil, by the very killing of the soil biology that puts it there in the first place. Many of these practices continue to be viewed as positive within the current mono-cultural ‘productivity’ paradigm.”

The claim that organic agriculture has something to offer an ETS is primarily predicated on the management of humus and nutrient recycling. Humus, with the carbon element at its core, is the building component that enables soil to sequester (and recycle) carbon in far more significant volumes than forests, which are currently recognised in existing trading schemes for their sequestering abilities. There are complexities related to measuring this, however the complexities and risks associated with forests haven’t stopped a very active and powerful lobbying group from having forests included in such schemes in the past. A non-threatening “opt in” approach would deliver benefits (financial and otherwise) to early adopter organic and biological farmers who could be

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argued to be currently internalizing some of these otherwise currently externalized costs of modern industrial (and synthetic inputs based) agriculture.

The real challenge for the coming century of food production is ensuring the internalizing of the real costs of good food produced naturally and sustainably. The organic industry claims to do this now, by consumers paying a premium for foods and fibres produced to standards that by design lead to an internalizing of many of the still “external” or unaccounted for costs within the modern agri-food system (energy use, nutrient run off, herbicides in water tables, food additives and pesticides in children’s diets). There will be much hubris in the coming year ahead, posturing and claims by various interest groups wishing to get their pound of flesh, if not carbon, out of such debates. It is vital that such debate is continually brought back to the need for science-based holistic approaches to these issues, rather than simplistic and singular ones about carbon.

Crude as a non mandatory ETS would be for agriculture for these early adopters, any benefits such as this we believe just may assist in shifting policy maker and researcher awareness away from the simplicity of carbon (as the giver of votes or the granter of research funds) and onto the more important paradigm changes still required in agricultural, water and broader resource management frameworks. The future for agriculture in Australia must be biological if we are to have a chance of lifting productivity and locking in resilient production and environmental management systems. While certified organic foods and fibres, purchased by astute and willing consumers, is the diamond edge tip to this movement, it is time such practices were locked into a broader application of approaches both in the research hubs of the country, and most importantly in the government circles that will increasingly be relied upon to fund and direct future research and policy support mechanisms.

The BFA’s 20 year birthday dinner celebrations of 2007 had an excellent, and controversial, speaker in Professor Robert Carter from James Cook University. It is too



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simplistic to box Prof. Carter as a “climate skeptic” as many do (as one of his many warnings is that weather could go either warmer or colder, drier or wetter in the coming century, and we should be prepared for both). Prof. Carter, being a geologist that he is, calls for calm and reflection on the current debate about CO2 driving observed climate change events. As unpopular as this position may be, it gives us pause for thought in relation to responding to such issues. “Climate change? That’s what climate does” sums up a reality check for us all. We can’t think that a simple bullet called reduction of carbon emissions, or some self-flagellating approach to frugality will deliver us future sustainability (many still do, and many politicians currently think that they can escape the environmental sustainability obligation by subscribing to it). It will be in

the design of the systems we produce and distribute food and fibres by that will define us and define whether or not we end up with a truly productive and resilient future agricultural system.

The organic food and farming sector in Australia is a treasure trove of examples of common sense, nature based, approaches to resolving what appear to be intractable planetary threats. As more consumers are realizing this and buying such products, it is about time that organic farming approaches were recognized, and incorporated, as keystone elements of our government’s approach to climate change management and carbon sequestration. Most importantly they should be recognised as working examples of the needed fundamental redesign of our agricultural and food industries. We look forward to that future, now. ◀◆